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Towards a Narratology of Acousmatic Music

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Abstract

Acousmatic works tend to operate on two simultaneous planes: a more abstract, musical level of gesture, phrase, colour, texture, and motion; and a narrative level, which references real-world objects, actions, contexts and environments. Where instrumental music, broadly speaking, accesses this narrative level primarily through the use of metaphor, acousmatic music, while maintaining access to the more programmatic elements found in instrumental music, also has the capacity to enact experience much more directly, through the explicit use and application of real-world sound and motion. This ranges from the use of referential sound imagery, to a broader use of gesture and action enacted via acousmatic music's phenomenologically-grounded syntax.

Most theoretical approaches to the acousmatic genre tend to focus more or less exclusively on the structural and formal elements of the sonic plane, with minimal reference to more overtly narrative aspects. In the attempt to rectify this imbalance, the field of narratology suggests itself as a likely candidate for expanding our theoretical toolkit.

While narratology was initially focused more or less exclusively on literary narratives, over the past decade, the field of narratology has branched out from these roots to a range of new media and intermedia narratives, including key focuses on film, video games, and hypertext. While this has indeed significantly broadened the field, it could be argued that this expansion has simply added a visual bias to the previous textual bias.

There is therefore much to be gained from a narratological approach to acousmatic music, in both directions. The narratological perspective calls attention to aspects of acousmatic composition and reception which have received too little theoretical attention; in exchange, acousmatic music offers an extremely relevant narratological case study, as the genre's strong narrative elements are for the most part entirely free of both the textual and visual elements upon which so much existing narrative theory is based. Acousmatic music can therefore serve to differentiate core aspects of narratology that hold true across diverse media from those elements which are significantly diminished in relevance once both text and vision are left behind.

This paper will present some of the primary findings of my doctoral investigation of acousmatic narrative. This investigation draws heavily from the field of cognitive narratology, championed by David Herman, and Marie-Laure Ryan's work on narrative across media, while incorporating past and current perspectives on acousmatic narrative. Central issues

include the cognitive structuring of narratives; the apparent – though possibly illusory – absence of narrator in acousmatic music; fiction vs. non-fiction in the acousmatic; mimesis vs. diegesis; the concept of 'spatial narrative'; and narrative intention vs. narrative reception.

Introduction

For me, acousmatic music is a deeply narrative art form. Where instrumental music, broadly speaking, accesses narrative primarily through the use of metaphor, acousmatic music, while maintaining access to the more programmatic elements found in instrumental music, also has the capacity to enact experience much more directly, through the explicit use and application of real-world sound and motion. This ranges from the use of referential sound imagery, to a broader use of gesture and action enacted via acousmatic music's phenomenologically-grounded syntax.

In attempting to come to terms with acousmatic music's narrative properties, the field of narratology suggests itself as a likely candidate, and over the last couple of years a number of theorists have begun to explore the potential of a narratological view on acousmatic music (Andean 2010; Brunson 2012; Çamci 2012; Hoffman 2013; Young 1996, 2007, 2009, 2013). There are some immediate obstacles that present themselves, however; primarily, narratology was founded with an exclusive focus on literary narratives, and as a result there is a great deal of narratology that is so specifically concerned with text that it quickly disintegrates upon translation to other media.

Narrative across media

There has, however, been increasing emphasis in narratology over the past couple of decades on what Marie-Laure Ryan has termed 'narrative across media' (Ryan 2004), leaving behind a purely textual approach to explore aspects of narrative that hold true across various media, or aspects of narrative that are unique to a given non-literary medium, or, more broadly, the human mind's tendency to construct narratives as a key means of organizing and making sense of information, of stimuli, and of the world (Fludernik 2005; Herman 2002 & 2013; Ryan 2004).

However, it is worth noting that many of these other media to which narratology has turned its attention recently are visual, notably film, video games, and comics or graphic novels, and in this sense has simply added a visual bias to the already existing textual bias. There is little, if any, attention paid to forms of sonic narrative, except as the less important sidekick in audiovisual forms.

A narratological perspective on acousmatic music therefore looks promising, in both directions: first, in that it may help us to better understand the narrative experience of acousmatic works, and second, in that it may be expected to help inform the field of narratology, by providing a rare example of an art form which clearly includes narrative properties, but that is neither text-based, nor image-based. Acousmatic music can therefore serve to differentiate core aspects of narratology that hold true across diverse media from those elements that are significantly diminished in relevance once both text and vision are left

behind. What's more, I propose that acousmatic music also makes an excellent narratological case study because it offers an unparalleled range from complete abstraction, to straight-up storytelling, and often moves flexibly along this axis, in so doing offering many shifting perspectives on narrativity.

We will begin with some of the absolute basics of narratology, and see how they apply to acousmatic music. Our first basic example: fiction vs. non-fiction.

Fiction vs. non-fiction

One of the many narratological questions is: What is fiction, and what is non-fiction? Are these genuinely meaningful qualifications, or are they largely artificial constructs? What is the distinction? Is there any clear distinction? What is the relationship between the two? And so forth.

How about for acousmatic music? To begin with, I'm going to dismiss the possibility that this would be an objective quality of the work, or indeed the entire notion of the 'neutral layer' of the work - that the work exists, 'out there', with a quantifiable nature independent of any actual engagement. As a result, the question of acousmatic music as fiction or non-fiction is tightly wound up with our experience of sound.

I claim that: all recorded sound is fiction; but, all sonic experience is non-fiction. Now, if we were to attempt to explore this properly it would very quickly lead us down an ontological rabbit hole without an end, so we're going to leave this here. Let us instead simply ask ourselves: if we accept my claim that all recorded sound is fiction while all sonic experience is non-fiction, where does that leave us with acousmatic music? Acousmatic music is *both* recorded sound *and* sonic experience. Does that mean that acousmatic music - or sound generally - can be both fiction and non-fiction simultaneously? My answer is, yes: to the extent that it is simultaneously recorded sound, and experience, acousmatic music is *both* fiction and non-fiction, in a balance that will shift simultaneously with our focus on the work as living experience, or the work as recorded sound.

The relevant distinction here is the act of mediation. Recorded sound is mediated, and it is this mediation that moves it into the realm of the fictional. This shift in its status between fiction or non-fiction is therefore a question of the extent to which our attention is drawn to this mediating act. Note that I am not claiming this as an absolute: I am not saying that 'because all acousmatic music is mediated, all acousmatic music is therefore fiction' - but rather, that it is only fiction to the extent that our attention is drawn to this mediation. This leaves a certain amount of power in the hands of the composer: to hide the act of mediation is to point us in the direction of non-fiction; to highlight the act of mediation is to point us in the direction of fiction.

Our experience of sound is profoundly different in this regard from other forms of experience. The distance between the sonic experience of 'I can hear that it's raining outside' and 'I hear a recording of 'it's raining outside'' is, at least potentially, zero. This is obviously not true of literature, which is mediated via text, leaving an enormous distance between the experience of the thing itself, and the experience of reading an account of that thing. There is already less distance between a visual representation and the thing itself, but this is again a much vaster

distance than in aural representation. And, perhaps, haptic art or olfactory art may one day be still more direct.

One of several modes of mediation at play here is temporal. Sound takes place in the 'now'. Text is more clearly a trace of events, as is film; in order for these to exist as traces, the initial events must lie in the past. This can also be true of sound, but I would argue that this is not sound's natural state: to be placed 'in the past', we need cues that encourage us to put sounds there, and these cues are again largely a question of mediation. In the absence of such cues, I propose that sound remains in the 'now'.

Another key element here is that, again with both text and film, these are things that have been done to or by *someone else*. There is no real risk of a reader or moviegoer genuinely believing that they are themselves undergoing some moment of the action. With sound, this is a very real possibility, and here perhaps we find the most marked instance of mediation of them all: myself vs. an exportation to 'some other'.

This is in part a question of differences between our senses, but it is also significantly a question of *degree* of mediation. With text, we cannot possibly ignore the mediation involved; with film, the mediation is a fraction less obvious; but with sound, it is possible - at least some of the time - for the mediation to vanish entirely.

Mimesis vs. diegesis

Here we encounter our next narratological question: mimesis vs. diegesis. This dichotomy stems from Plato, and is in essence a question of presentation vs. representation. For Plato, theatre is mimetic, where literature is diegetic; it is a question of re-enactment vs. recounting, of whether something is being presented directly, or represented. In other words, we again find this question of mediation: direct experience is mimesis; mediation leads to diegesis. This is something that has been discussed by Trevor Wishart (1986; 1996), Simon Emmerson (1986), and more recently by Anil Çameci (2012).

This distinction is quite central to our main premise. My claim that acousmatic music is narrative in a manner that is unique and distinct from instrumental music, is based here, in acousmatic music's capacity for mimesis, where instrumental music can only access diegesis. Acousmatic music, however, is in no way *limited* to mimesis; we too can engage diegesis, through a great many possible strategies. One of acousmatic music's central strengths is its completely flexible access to the full spectrum between mimesis at one end, and diegesis on the other.

To return to our rain example, the difference between the symbol and the original collapses if our experience of them is undifferentiated: this is mimesis. However, this is not the only plane that acousmatic music accesses. We aren't constantly being tricked into believing that it's raining. The composer might draw attention to the sound's mediation, by stressing its nature as a document; or, the composer might draw attention to the sound's nature as a communicate between composer or listener; or, attention can be drawn to a complex symbolic construction from the image for rain; or the sonic abstraction of 'rain' via the triggering of reduced listening... It's a long list of potential strategies.

To some extent, this is all a question of a communication between author and audience; between composer and listener. Let's rephrase some of the instances we have just described:

The composer can create a situation for 'direct experience' for the listener: 'It's raining'. The composer vanishes; the listener is getting rained on.

Or, we described many possibilities for mediation: a communicate between composer and listener; a document of rain; etc etc. So, first of all, the composer has reappeared; and, second of all, there are a number of possible strategies, and a number of possible steps, between composer and listener.

An acousmatic narrator?

This brings us to the concept of the narrator. In literary narratives, the narrator of course is of central importance. In acousmatic music, however, the absence of text makes it impossible to conjure up a personified narrator-figure.

But, how do we define 'narrator'? And, more importantly, what is the *role* of the narrator? Is the narrator's role not, first and foremost, to mediate between author and audience? And, going further, possibly to direct or instruct the audience in the stance they might take towards the material with which they are being presented?

And, is that not exactly what we just described in acousmatic music: a mediating presence, between composer and listener, that instructs the listener with regards to their possible or probable position towards the material?

So, is there an acousmatic narrator? Our answer is: yes; maybe; sometimes.

In our direct experience example, I would argue that we have bypassed the narrator altogether, in a manner that is maybe not possible with text. But beyond that, I would argue that we have indeed located an acousmatic narrator: for example, whenever our attention is drawn to the 'fixed media' aspect of the work, this is a *narrating act*; whenever our attention is drawn to the 'hand of the composer', this is a narrating act; most importantly, whenever it is emphasized that what you are hearing is not actually happening to you - that it is happening *somewhere* else, *sometime* else, *to someone* else - this more than anything else is a narrating act. Now, not all of this is under the conscious control of the composer; acousmatic narration can be deliberately crafted, but I would argue that, unlike literature, acousmatic narration is a creative collaboration between composer and listener. For example, where the composer might intend direct experience, a given listening situation may cause our multimodal perception to too heavily contradict what we're hearing, leading to a kind of inter-sensory mediation that once again pushes what we are hearing into the territory of narration.

Another distinction with literary narration is that very rarely, if ever, is the acousmatic narrator *personified*, an act which is quite common in literature. In fact, I would propose that those rare instances in which the acousmatic narrator *is* personified, are works that explicitly employ text to perform this task. I'm thinking here of, first and foremost, Luc Ferrari, but also Katharine Norman, Hildgeard Westerkamp, and a number of others.

Narrative relationships

Broadly speaking, one of the most significant aspects of narratology is the establishment of narrative relationships - first and foremost, between author and audience. We have already inserted the narrator in between these two: author - narrator - audience. Next, Wayne C. Booth (1961) coined a very important term: the 'implied author': "By the implied author, Booth means the version of himself or herself the author constructs in writing the narrative" (Phelan 2006: 299). This is a very significant construct, and, I would argue, particularly important in acousmatic music. In a great many acousmatic works, the composer is in essence the protagonist of the piece. I am thinking in particular here of virtuosic works, or works which draw attention to the 'composer's hand', to compositional or performance gestures, to a mediatic listening of the composer's studio performance.

Let's take an example: Jonty Harrison's '*...et ainsi de suite...*', a piece which is built around increasingly complex transformations of the sound of a glass. In this piece, I would argue that the glass is the *character*. The work begins: we are immediately introduced to our main character, the glass. Very soon, the glass starts to be submitted to a range of transformations, and so, as the work develops, Harrison the 'implied author' is very present; we aren't listening to 'a glass performing a series of actions' - the glass is not the agent, these are clearly things that are *being done to* the glass. But, no other character or agent has entered the work. I would argue that our attention is drawn to Harrison, and the series of transformations that he is performing upon the glass-character - but not, of course, to the 'real' Jonty Harrison; when I listen to the piece, I don't literally imagine Harrison with a virtual glass in his hand. It is an 'implied' Harrison that we are listening to - a kind of 'virtual' Harrison, who is performing a string of virtual actions upon a virtual glass.

While this appearance of the implied author is far from unusual in acousmatic music, it is rather unique in comparison with the implied author in literature, in that our implied Harrison is clearly the *protagonist* of the work. Our only character - the glass - is definitely NOT the protagonist; the glass is clearly a passive victim of these many transformations. Rather, we are following the trace of the composer's hand: implied Harrison himself is the protagonist, having entered his own story, and now manipulating his character directly, in a manner that very rarely happens in literature, if at all.

In literature, the line between actual author and implied author is sometimes rather fuzzy; in acousmatic music, however, this division is often very clear, in part because the implied author moves in *real-time*, where the real author does not. In works in which the composer has a significant presence, as in '*...et ainsi de suite...*', we experience their actions at the rate at which we ourselves move through the piece, not in the segmented, protracted time of the actual creation of the work. When we 'feel' the hand of the composer, it is not a hand that painstakingly places points one by one on an automation line by clicking a mouse; it is a real-time hand gesture that we somehow sense, regardless of whether such a hand gesture might have been involved in creating a given phrase or not. The implied author performs at the same pace as the listener receives, where the real author very clearly does not.

The acousmatic listening experience

Let's zoom out a bit, to ask some of the very basic questions.

How do we experience and interpret an acousmatic work? We hear 'things happening'; how do we experience this?

For example, who is the 'subject' of what we hear? Am I, the listener, 'doing' this? or is someone else? Or, perhaps it is a *passive* question: Who is the *object* of what we hear? Is this *happening to me*? Are these sonic events 'happening' at all? - are they 'now' and 'direct', or is someone 'telling me' about them - which would make them a) temporally mediated, and b) narrated?

A few basic options:

- 1) This is *happening* to me.
- 2) This *happened* to the composer.
- 3) The composer is doing this *to* me.
- 4) The composer is telling me *about* this happening.

The differences between these are rarely explicit in acousmatic music; it is often fairly subtle cues that direct the listener towards one of these positions, but these are no less real for their subtlety.

Now, consider the relationships these imply between composer and listener:

Number 1: Composer says: "You are sitting in a room". In this way, second person narration is far more common in acousmatic music than in literary narrative, as it is much more natural in sound than in text.

Numbers 2 & 3: The narrator and the 'implied author' are conflated.

Number 2: Composer says: "I sat in a room".

Number 3: Composer says: "I am putting you in a room".

Number 4: Composer says: "Someone was in a room." This is clearly narrated; there is a narrator.

Example: Motion

Eric Clarke, in 'Ways of Listening' (2005), uses motion as a very good example of some of these questions, interestingly by using 'Wozzeck' as an example. Let's say we hear "Motion 'towards'": something moves from distant, to close. What is moving?

- Is the listener moving forward, towards the object?
- Is the object moving forward, inside the work, towards the listener?
- Or, is the whole 'work' in motion (again, towards the listener)?
- Or, is this a narrated event - are we being told about an object's movement? Is the movement being described, or experienced?

Jonty Harrison: Undertow

Let's consider another piece by Jonty Harrison: 'Undertow'. This is a great example for our purposes: it is sonically-motivated, but very strongly narratively driven, and the narrative in question is both extremely simple, and extremely clear.

Because I am writing a text, I would like to describe the piece here in words. This should be fairly easy, since, as already mentioned, 'Undertow' is narratively an extremely simple piece; however, in order to talk about it, I have to put the work's narrative into words, and this turns out to be almost impossible without choosing a narrative stance on the piece. There are a number of possible listener relationships with the work, but I cannot describe the piece in words without choosing one and thereby dismissing the others. The closest I can come, is to describe it just as a sequence of sounds: the work opens on a beach scene; eventually, there are bubbling sounds; then dripping sounds; then a beach scene again. There is a very clear narrative here, but we are faced with some questions:

- Is this happening to us? Is this an experience that Harrison has crafted for us?
- Is this a *narrative* of something happening to us?
- Is this a narrative of something happening to Harrison?
- Is this the experience of a third party narrator?

All of these are possible, but I propose that, in essence, it is option one: this is happening to us. We are on a beach; we walk towards the water; we slowly walk into the water, until we are eventually submerged; we remain submerged for a while; eventually we return, we come up out of the water, with water dripping off of us, and walk back up onto the beach.

But: is this direct experience? Or first-person narration: "I am walking into the water", etc? Except, of course, we are not the authors, Harrison is, which means this would be second-person narration - Harrison saying to us "You are walking into the water". Now, this is both the wonderful and the terrible thing about pronouns, and a terrific example of the contrasting affordances of text-based narrative and sonic narrative: it is, in essence, impossible to present the narrative of 'Undertow' in text without employing a pronoun, which forces a very specific narrative position onto the work, where in sound, this remains much more flexible. This flexibility is an enormous advantage; on the other hand, text allows for the clarity of a very specific statement, which is not generally possible in acousmatic narrative. This represents something of a trade-off.

It is very interesting to note that in his programme notes, Harrison uses the pronoun 'we': "Plunging beneath the waves we discover a world teeming with life and pulsing with energy" (Harrison 2007). In a sense, this is almost side-stepping the problem of narration, but it also points to what in my opinion is an extremely significant source of some of the differences between literary narration and acousmatic narration.

How many of these difference are, in fact, social, rather than aesthetic or theoretical? Sound is - or can be - a collective experience: we gather together in the concert hall, and experience the piece together. It is, or can be, to some extent, a communal experience, a collective experience. Literature, on the other hand, is not. It is forever a private, personal transaction: at

some point, privately, the author wrote it; at some point, privately, the reader reads it. There are similarities with acousmatic music: certainly the composer generally works in privacy, much like the author; and works are often experienced in private, on headphones at home for example. But, with acousmatic music, there is at least the *capacity* for community experience.

What is possibly far more important, however, is that the author of the work can share in its reception. The composer can sit in the hall, together with everyone who is hearing the work for the first time, and share in its reception with them. This is definitively impossible with literature; the closest one gets is a public reading by the author, but this is a performative situation, a very different relationship, and a very different experience for the person reading aloud than for those listening.

I would like to hypothesize that many - or at least some - of the differences in narrative relationships in literature and in acousmatic music stem from this fact: that literature is a private, unilinear communicate, whereas the reception of acousmatic music is, or can be, a) communal, and b) a shared experience by author and audience alike, in which the author has become simply another listener. Acousmatic music is much less a question of 'telling', and much more a question of 'experiencing', and potentially of 'sharing', which allows for the potentially profound significance of the 'we' of Harrison's programme notes.

Acousmatic narrative vs. Literary narrative

So, in conclusion, a few of the advantages or differences between acousmatic narrative and literary narrative:

- i) Acousmatic narrative is wildly flexible. It can slide freely between narrative constellations without making any explicit reference to having done so, and the listener will follow with perfect agility. This allows for a much higher rate of narrative transformation; a greater number of narrative points and options; and far more potential relationships between those points.
- ii) Literary or textual narrative can be much more clear, more specific, and more explicit. The audience does not need to simply *experience* the narrative relationships, nor to deduce them or interpret them; they can be *told*. This makes it possible to make explicit, with incredible accuracy, the network of narrative relationships at play. But, it is a direct trade-off for flexibility.
- iii) Literary narrative is much more under the direct control of the author. In acousmatic music, narrative is a creative collaboration between composer and listener, to a greater extent than the collaboration between author and reader.
- iv) Sound cannot lie; words can. If all sound is non-fiction, then it cannot lie. Many of the more sophisticated aspects of contemporary narratology are concerned with the capacity to be indirect; to deceive; to deliberately leave out; or to outright lie - from 'indirect narration', to 'unreliable narration' (Booth 1961; Phelan 2006). Acousmatic music cannot lie; it can only move from truth to truth. At best, acousmatic music can deceive: we regularly 'trick' the listener, making them think they are listening to a given sound source, and then, haha! we tear back some transformative veil, some trick of processing, to reveal that in fact the source all

along had been something quite different. But, as deceptions go, this one is quite innocent; and again, to some extent, it can be argued that we have simply supplanted an initial truth with another.

However, in all of these cases in which literary narrative trumps acousmatic narrative, acousmatic music has an ace up its sleeve: acousmatic music can choose, at any moment, simply to employ speech - and immediately, it has access to any and all of these aspects of narrative that it otherwise finds challenging: suddenly, we can be as explicit as you please; suddenly, we can lie and deceive; suddenly, we can pin down narrative relationships between author, narrator, and listener, in ways that would otherwise be more ambiguous. This risks, however, moving beyond the boundaries of what many consider the confines of the acousmatic genre, moving outwards towards other genres - radiophony, text-sound - that more commonly employ speech and text-based narrative. It risks contradicting many people's conception of what 'acousmatic' means.

We have therefore found, first, reasonable evidence of the existence of acousmatic narrative, and second, a number of key distinctions between acousmatic narrative and literary narrative. This lends weight to our opening hypothesis that, not only does narratology offer a relevant perspective on acousmatic music, but acousmatic music, due to these distinct and unique narrative aspects, also provides an excellent case study for narrative theory, extending beyond the textual and visual biases common in much of the theory to date.

As for acousmatic theory, it is tempting to imagine an analytical scaffolding that might incorporate narratological elements together with structural and morphological concerns to construct a more rounded approach to acousmatic and electroacoustic analysis, an approach that might be expected to offer a better reflection of the complexity of the acousmatic listening experience.

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